

BIG JAY McNEELY



Blowin'
Down
The
House

BIG JAY'S LATEST & GREATEST

1. LOVE WILL NEVER FAIL
2. LOVE IS STRONGER THAN HURT
3. MY LOVE NEVER ENDED
4. I'VE BEEN MISTREATED
5. YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO HOME
6. PARTY
7. BIG JAY'S HOP
8. BLOW, BLOW, BLOW
9. WILLIE THE COOL CAT
10. ROCK CANDY
11. NERVOUS, MAN, NERVOUS
12. GET ON UP & LET'S BOOGIE

Cover photo by Bob Willoughby,
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Cecil James McNeely began recording almost seventy years ago, in 1948, waiving his tenor saxophone on a Johnny Otis record called "Barrelhouse Stomp." He was 21. Shortly afterward, producer Ralph Bass pulled him aside to record a November 1948 session for Bop Records, then sold the tapes to Savoy Records, a major label whose roster included Charlie Parker, Erroll Garner, and Cecil's hero, Lester Young. Savoy owner Herman Lubinsky came to Los Angeles, saw McNeely in action, and made a snap judgment that changed the young man's career. He didn't like the name Cecil, and since Cecil's friends addressed him by his middle initial, "Jay," Lubinsky announced: "From now on you're Big Jay!"

In February 1949, his second Savoy release, "The Deacon's Hop," shot to number-one on *Billboard's* race chart. For the next several years, Big Jay recorded for several major rhythm and blues companies—including Exclusive, Aladdin, Imperial, Federal, King, and Vee-Jay—toured the chit'lin circuit, and performed at the Apollo Theater. He became notorious for his tea-kettle high notes and pyrotechnic stagecraft. Wearing garishly colored suits, he'd wallow onstage and play his horn while kicking his feet in the air. Accompanying Lionel Hampton at a Los Angeles baseball stadium, he stole the show by lying on his back on second base and, scooting his feet, sliding all the way to third base while honking one note over and over. At clubs, he'd walk on top of the bar, then out the door, usually with the audience trailing behind him, vocally mimicking the wild noises roiling up from the bell of his sax. In San Francisco, Big Jay strolled off the bandstand, out the door, and onto a passing cable car. In San Diego, he was arrested for disturbing the peace while competing with car horns on the street; his band kept playing onstage, awaiting his return, until Big Jay telephoned for bail money. The stories go on and on, and contemporary newspapers and trade magazines corroborate many of them.

In the early 1950s, long before the psychedelic era, Big Jay created a flickering old-time movie effect with strobe lights. He employed black lights to make his phosphorous horn glow in the dark. *Billboard* nicknamed him "Big Jay McSquealy." He teamed with other saxophonists like Joe Houston for a "Battle of the Honkers," often at theaters rented after-hours. At one now famous show at the Olympic Auditorium at 18th and Grand in downtown Los Angeles, on October 6, 1951, Big Jay and several rock n' roll acts performed in front of thousands of black, white, and Chicano fans. Hollywood photographer Bob Willoughby happened to take a photograph of Big Jay in action that has since appeared in countless magazines, at art galleries, and on album covers, including this one. (Incidentally, the white teenager in the center of the shot, Marty Clark, approached Big Jay at a club fifty years later, displayed a copy of the picture, and declared, "That's me!")

Naturally, in those days of racial segregation, authorities were alarmed by white kids being mesmerized by black shamans pounding mantra-like notes in the style of Southern Negro preachers. A board of psychologists tried to assess, without much success, the glassy-eyed group hysteria at a Big Jay McNeely show. The Los Angeles Fire Department began enforcing fire codes to shut down his venues and harass kids for being in the wrong part of town. Promoters moved his shows into suburban towns like El Monte, where the Legion Stadium

subsequently became an R&B mecca. In time, the honking saxophonist's manic energy was subsumed by rock 'n' roll and relegated to instrumental breaks on doo-wop records. Big Jay smoothed out his act, and in 1959 he enjoyed his first pop hit, the bluesy "There Is Something on Your Mind," which has since been recorded by everyone from Gene Vincent to B. B. King. There's even an unreleased version by Jimi Hendrix, who as a boy attended Big Jay's shows in Seattle with his father and most likely picked up some of the sax man's showmanship. Big Jay gave up performing in the mid-1960s to work at the U.S. Post Office, but reactivated his career in 1983. He has been busy ever since, recording over a dozen albums and regularly touring Europe, Japan, Australia, and North Africa. In 1989, he was playing at the Quasimodo Club in Berlin, West Germany, on the night the Berlin Wall came down, and several journalists mused that, like Joshua, Big Jay must have wandered out of the club and blown it down. Two years earlier, he performed with several blues legends, including B.B. King and Etta James, at the 1987 Grammy Awards.

Rather than coast on legendhood, Big Jay McNeely has continued to update his act. He began singing. He used electronic effects on his horn. He moved into funk and hip-hop. Even today, he is always thinking about some new project unlike anything he's done before. Big Jay can still stir up a crowd with a raving honkfest when needed, but as he often says, he's no longer a young man, and if he had known way back then that he was going to reach 89 years of age, he would have taken better care of himself.

What's interesting about this album is that it presents Big Jay then and now. The earliest track here is "Willie The Cool Cat," recorded for Exclusive Records in February 1949, with brother Bob McNeely's baritone sax giving rock-steady support. "Blow, Blow, Blow," recorded November 8, 1951, for Imperial Records, is like a time machine delivering the listener to a sweaty club on Central Avenue. "Rock Candy" and "Nervous, Man Nervous" were recorded June 23, 1953, with a then unknown vocal group called The Platters chanting and shouting on the second number. "Big Jay's Hop," an update of "The Deacon's Hop," was recorded March 15, 1955, for Vee-Jay Records. Nothing demonstrates the continuing vitality of these recordings more than the inclusion of two of them, "Willie the Cool Cat" and "Blow, Blow, Blow," in major motion pictures: Warner Bros.' 2013 film, *Gangster Squad*, and 2015's Oscar nominated bio-pic *Trumbo*.

And then there are the new cuts showcasing a modern, mature Big Jay McNeely, writing and singing about the verities of romantic and spiritual love, which an older man comes to appreciate, and the importance of not taking mortal things too seriously, which keeps an old man young. Aply assisted by the recording talents of Richard Ihara and arranger/producer Jürgen Engler, Big Jay McNeely remains a powerhouse as he shambles toward the end of his first century, still capable of blowing down the house.

— Jim Dawson, 2016

- 1. LOVE WILL NEVER FAIL** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Arrangement by Richard Ihara / Published by BMG Music Publishing
- 2. LOVE IS STRONGER THAN HURT** Written by Big Jay McNeely & Jürgen Engler / Published by Dimension Gate Music & BMG Music Publishing
- 3. MY LOVE NEVER ENDED** Written by Jürgen Engler / Published by Dimension Gate Music
- 4. I'VE BEEN MISTREATED** Written by Big Jay McNeely & Jürgen Engler / Published by Dimension Gate Music & BMG Music Publishing
- 5. YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO HOME** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Arrangement by Richard Ihara / Published by BMG Music Publishing
- 6. PARTY** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Published by BMG Music Publishing
- 7. BIG JAY'S HOP** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Published by BMG Platinum Songs
Recorded March 15, 1955, for Vee-Jay Records when Big Jay and his band were traveling through Chicago. Remake of his 1949 hit, "Deacon's Hop." Earl DeWitt on organ, brother Bob McNeely on baritone, Cecil E. Harris on bass, and Johnny Walker, drums.
- 8. BLOW, BLOW, BLOW** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Published by EMI Unart Catalog, Inc.
Recorded November 8, 1951, in Los Angeles for Imperial Records. Bob McNeely on baritone. Three Dots and a Dash vocals.
- 9. WILLIE THE COOL CAT** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Published by BMG Bumblebee
February 1949 at Radio Recorders in Hollywood for Exclusive Records. Bob McNeely, John Anderson, tot, Streamline Ewing on trombone, Jimmy O'Brien, piano; Prinze "Candy" Stanzel, guitar; Ted Shirley, bass, and Leonard "Tight" Hardiman on drums.
- 10. ROCK CANDY** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Published by BMG Music Publishing
June 23, 1953, at Radio Recorders. Bob McNeely, Boyd Dunlop piano, Dwight Davis organ, Ike Brown bass, Darnell "Blimp" Cole drums.
- 11. NERVOUS, MAN, NERVOUS** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Published by BMG Music Publishing
Same session as "Rock Candy," with added vocals by The Platters (Alex Hodge, Jody Jefferson, Herb Reed, and Cornel Gunter).
- 12. GET ON UP & LET'S BOOGIE** Written by Big Jay McNeely / Published by BMG Music Publishing

Tracks 1-6 & Track 12: Produced by Jürgen Engler

Tracks 1-5: Vocals and sax engineered and recorded by Richard Ihara

Additional vocals on "Love Will Never Fail" by Tonika McDaniel

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